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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews what is known about adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learners and learning disabilities, suggests ways to identify and assess ESL adults who may have learning disabilities, and offers practical methods for both instruction and teacher training. Topics covered in some detail include identifying and diagnosing learning disabilities in second language learning adults, assessing the learners' needs and considering teacher strategies for addressing them, and a review of instructional materials and methods. It is concluded that although a learning disability does not affect all areas of learning, it may have significant impact on the social and work life of the learner. Therefore the field of adult ESL must intensify its efforts to assist learning disabled adult ESL learners and their teachers. Such efforts require more long-term sources of funding for research, specifically in the area of assessment and instruction, training, and assistive technology. (Contains 14 references.) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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ESL Instruction and Adults With Learning Disabilities

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Some adult English language learners experience difficulty in sustaining employment and showing progress on assessment measures. This may be due, in part, to learning disabilities. According to the federal Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities, learning disabilities are disorders "that create difficulty in acquiring and using skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and reasoning. These disorders can also inhibit mathematical abilities and social interactions" (Brown & Ganzglass, 1998, p. 2). Learning disabilities are generally thought to be caused by a dysfunction in the central nervous system, and people who have learning disabilities are considered to possess average or above-average intelligence (Seattle-King County Private Industry Council, 2000). Little is known about how these disabilities affect the adult learner of English as a second language (ESL).

This digest reviews what is known about adult ESL learners and learning disabilities, suggests ways to identify and assess ESL adults who may have learning disabilities, and offers practical methods for both instruction and teacher training.

Learning Disabilities in a Second Language

Learners may show learning disabilities in a second language when they do not in their first. A learning disability may be so subtle in a first language that it is masked by an individual's compensatory strategies, e.g., getting general information through the overall context when specific words or concepts are not understood, and substituting known words for words that cause difficulty. These strategies may not be available to the learner in the new language (Ganschow & Sparks, 1993). Sometimes a learning disability does not manifest itself in the learner's first language "because of the systematic structure or transparent nature of his native language versus English" (D. Shewcraft, personal communication, June 2000). For example, a reading disability may be more pronounced in English than in Spanish, where the sound-symbol correspondence system is more predictable.

Identifying Learning Disabled ESL Adults

It is thought that the percentage of learning disabled students in adult education classes may exceed the percentage in the population as a whole, with some estimates as high as 80% (Seattle-King County Private Industry Council, 2000). Although it is not known if this is true in ESL classes, there is a general sense in the field that it may *not* be true. Unlike native speakers in adult education programs, many ESL learners were not unsuccessful in their previous educational experience. Rather, they are enrolled in programs to learn to speak, read, and write in a new language. Therefore, care should be taken before labeling ESL learners as learning disabled.

Being identified as learning disabled can be stigmatizing for anyone—adult, child, native English speaker, or ESL learner (McCormick, 1991). Educators stress the importance of weighing the advantages of identifying adult learners as learning disabled (planning instruction to help learners, making them eligible for services, and so forth) against the possible stigma of the label (Almanza, Singleton, & Terrill, 1995/96).

Before testing and labeling an adult ESL student as learning disabled, other reasons for lack of expected progress should be considered. Educators (Adkins, Sample, & Birman, 1999; Almanza, Singleton, & Terrill, 1995/96; Grognet, 1997; Schwarz & Burt, 1995) have noted the following reasons for slow progress in learning English:

- Limited academic skills in a learner's native language due to limited previous education
- Lack of effective study habits
- The interference of a learner's native language, particularly if the learner is used to a non-Roman alphabet
- A mismatch between the instructor's teaching style and the learner's expectations of how the class will be conducted
- Stress or trauma that refugees and other immigrants have experienced, causing symptoms such as difficulty in concentration and memory dysfunction
- Sociocultural factors such as age, physical health, social identity, and even diet
- External problems with work, health, and family
- Sporadic attendance
- Lack of practice outside the classroom

These behaviors or problems will most likely affect all learning, whereas a learning disability usually affects only one area of learning.

Assessing the Learner

The use of standardized testing to identify learning disabilities presents problems. First, instruments designed to diagnose learning disabilities are usually normed on native English speakers, so the results cannot be reliably used with learners whose first language is not English. Second, since the concepts and language being tested may have no direct translation, the validity of tests translated into the native language is questionable. Third, most tests are primarily designed for and normed on younger students and may not be suitable for adults.

No single assessment technique is sufficient to diagnose a learning disability; multiple assessment measures are necessary. Even before an interview or other assessments are administered, instructors should answer the following questions about a learner:

1. Has the problem persisted over time?
2. Has the problem resisted normal instruction?
3. Does the learner show a clear pattern of strengths and weaknesses in class?
4. Does the learner show a clear pattern of strengths and weaknesses outside of class?
5. Does the problem interfere with learning or a life activity in some way to a significant degree?

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If the responses to these questions are affirmative, there is probably a learning problem that should be looked into more closely. The following are suggestions on how to do this.

- Interview learners. This can provide a variety of useful information, such as educational and language history and social background, the learner's strengths, and the learner's perception on the nature of the suspected problem.
- Collect information about the learner's work. Portfolio assessment, where measurements of learner progress in reading and writing are considered along with attendance data, writing samples, autobiographical information, and work on class assignments, can provide a broad picture of the learner's performance. Keeping a learner portfolio is helpful in documenting the persistence of problems as well as which teaching strategies have worked or not worked.
- Use visual screening and routine hearing tests. What appears to be a learning disability may be due in part to developmental visual problems or correctable auditory problems.

Instructional Methods and Materials

Learning disabilities affect learning in any language and must therefore be a guiding factor in designing instruction for the adult learner with disabilities. Educators of learning disabled children and adults (Almanza, Singleton, & Terrill, 1995/96; Baca & Cervantes, 1991; Ganschow & Sparks, 1993) give the following suggestions for providing instruction.

- Be highly structured and predictable.
- Teach small amounts of material at one time in sequential steps.
- Include opportunities to use several senses and learning strategies.
- Provide multisensory reviews.
- Recognize and build on learners' strengths and prior knowledge.
- Simplify language but not content.
- Emphasize content words and make concepts accessible through the use of pictures, charts, maps, etc.
- Reinforce main ideas and concepts through rephrasing rather than through verbatim repetition.
- Be aware that learners often can take in information, but may experience difficulty retrieving it and sorting it appropriately.
- Provide a clean, uncluttered, quiet, and well-lit learning environment.

In adult basic education and adult ESL instruction where little time or money is spent on program capacity building through research and teacher training, there are few instructional models to look toward (Burt & Keenan, 1998). However, some programs are developing their own practical guides and disseminating them to a wider audience (Hatt & Nichols, 1995; Shewcraft & Witkop, 1998).

Technology has potential for assisting adult learners with learning disabilities to acquire a second language; computers have proven to be particularly useful (Gerber & Reiff, 1994; Riviere, 1996). In fact, adult ESL learners who have had limited success in learning English report that working one-on-one in the computer lab with a teacher seems more comfortable and productive than being one of many students in a crowded classroom (Almanza, Singleton, & Terrill, 1995/96). Using assistive technology can build self-esteem as well as provide immediate feedback, two things all adult language learners can benefit from.

Conclusion

Although a learning disability does not effect all areas of learning, it may have a significant impact on the social and work life of the learner. Therefore, the field of adult ESL must intensify its efforts to assist learning disabled adult ESL learners and their teachers. Such efforts require greater and more long-term sources of funding for research, specifically in the areas of assessment and instruction, training, and assistive technology.

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